



THE IN-BETWEENERS

THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES AND THE RUSSIA-WEST CONFLICT

Nelli Babayan

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On the cover: Before the Minsk negotiations, February 11, 2015. © Government of Belarus

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Russia-West conflict, attention is often drawn to Russian President Vladimir Putin, trying to anticipate his next move. As a result, it becomes easy to miss the unlikely winners and drivers of this confrontation. One of the drivers is the domestic politics of the states in-between the European Union and Russia, and one big winner, at least in the short term, is illiberalism. It is not simply EU incentives or Russian pressure that influences the foreign policy orientation of these countries, but also their often less-than-democratic political and corrupt economic elite constellations. This dynamic is seen in the countries of the Eastern Partnership — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine — which have been at the core of Russia-West conflict. Domestic elites can downplay their undemocratic practices by capitalizing on the ongoing rivalry between Russia and the West — note the case of the lifting of Western sanctions on Belarus in February 2016 despite a lack of progress on democracy and human rights. The bargaining power of some Eastern Partnership countries vis-à-vis the West seems to have increased, although their compliance with the rules and norms promoted by the West have not meaningfully changed or have in some cases even decreased.

If the transatlantic partners want to achieve specific reforms in these countries, they need to provide commitment backed up by credibility, consistency, and (smart) conditionality, as well as continuous and clear communication. Western support to Eastern Partnership countries should continue and be enhanced in return for tangible political and economic reforms, though conditionality should be differentiated and adapted to local conditions. The West should pursue further economic investment and closer security cooperation by providing technical assistance and expertise, especially in border control when necessary. At the same time, the West should more actively engage in negotiations over resolution of so-called frozen conflicts. Clear communication of the West's policies and principles, and the benefits of these for local communities, is important in an environment where local media may be constrained in its freedom, Kremlin-controlled channels have wide reach, and yet there is also noticeable support for the EU.

1 IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT RUSSIA

Among the drivers of the confrontation between Russia and the West is the domestic politics of the states in-between the European Union and Russia.

In the Russia-West conflict, attention is often drawn to Russian President Vladimir Putin, trying to anticipate his next move.¹ As a result, it becomes easy to miss the unlikely winners and drivers of this confrontation. More worryingly, when focusing on tactical moves, it also becomes easy to miss those losing from this confrontation. The transatlantic partners often seem to overlook what they need to provide when dealing with third countries: commitment backed up by credibility, consistency, and (smart) conditionality, as well as continuous and clear communication.

In the long term, should transatlantic partners manage to enhance their solidarity, a new-found transatlantic unity while countering Russia's actions may be a success story.² Yet, at least in the short term, one big winner is illiberalism, the focus of this paper. Among the drivers of the confrontation between Russia and the West is the domestic politics of the states in-between the European Union (EU) and Russia. And when illiberalism is the winner, democracy-oriented societies and groups inevitably lose, even without being directly involved in the conflict. This dynamic is seen in the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)³ — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova,

and Ukraine — which have been at the core of Russia-West conflict.

Explaining the different choices of the EaP countries through varying degrees of Russian pressure on its weaker neighbors is a parsimonious option. There is no doubt that in its effort to derail Western policies, Moscow is both willing and capable of exploiting interests and perceptions of elites and publics in the EaP countries. Russia's Ukraine strategy obviously backfired in 2013-14, as the majority of Ukrainians were clearly not willing to accept the imposition of the Kremlin's rule. Yet, despite a popular backlash, it ultimately worked in Armenia, due to the country's security problems. It also continues to cause trouble in Moldova and undermine the prospects of Georgia's Euroatlantic integration.⁴

However, while plausible, this is an incomplete assessment of the situation. In the Russia-West conflict, the account of the domestic politics of the countries in-between can be almost as important as the account of Russia's economic or military tools. It is not simply EU incentives or Russian pressure that influences the foreign policy orientations of these countries. What we tend to leave out of the bigger picture are the often less-than-democratic political and corrupt economic elite constellations in these countries.

Russia's exploits would have been less likely if more of these countries' elites were genuinely democracy-oriented or interested in the free-market competition proposed in Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) with the EU, rather than in maintaining oligarchic, monopolistic, or authoritarian practices. For their part, the EU and the United States may have underestimated

¹ The paper uses the word "West" as shorthand for the United States and the European Union.

² A. de Hoop Scheffer, M. Michelot, and M. Quencez, "Solidarity Under Stress in the Transatlantic Realm," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 14, 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/solidarity-under-stress-transatlantic-realm>; A. Moravcsik, "Success in Ukraine Could Threaten Western Unity," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, November 20, 2015, <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2015/11/20/success-ukraine-could-threaten-western-unity>.

³ The Eastern Partnership is a European Union initiative for six of its Eastern European (also post-Soviet) partners, not including Russia, which includes support to market economy, sustainable development, and good governance. Programs available to Eastern Partnership countries included an Association Agreement and Deep and a Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU. For more information on the Eastern Partnership, see http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm.

⁴ V. Rukhadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia: How Does It Work?" *The Jamestown Foundation*, February 19, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45116&cHash=9d799ced153cb3db2a755073c9324ff5.

local elites' authoritarian tendencies, corrupt economic dealings, conservative (verging on discriminating) approaches to human rights, and security conundrums faced by at least four of EaP countries even before the Ukraine conflict started.

At the same time, policymakers and analysts tend to hastily equate actions of the political elites with the wishes of the public. Moreover, they tend to leave out the ability of domestic elites to downplay their undemocratic practices by capitalizing on the ongoing rivalry between Russia and the West. Take the case of Belarus and the lifting of Western sanctions in February 2016 despite lack of progress. In an effort to prevent Minsk from siding more closely with Russia, the EU and the United States have relaxed their democracy and human rights conditionality. The Russia-West conflict may have partially moved to other theatres, for example the conflict in Syria. However, the bargaining power of some EaP countries vis-à-vis the West seems to have increased, although their compliance with the rules and norms promoted by the West have not meaningfully changed or have in some cases even decreased.

On the losing side of these developments are the EaP countries that have consistently supported closer cooperation with the West. As comparative frontrunners in democracy and human rights, they expect more from the EU than another vague agreement, especially when they continue to comply with various conditions. Countries like Georgia also continue to request consideration for NATO membership and prove their readiness for security cooperation by providing troops for NATO and U.S. military missions.⁵ Yet, at least two factors put the problems of the countries in-between on the backburner for the transatlantic partners. First, so-called "enlargement fatigue" seems stronger

than ever in the EU, and is aggravated by Russia's counteractions, the euro crisis, and the massive influx of refugees. Second, as U.S. President Barack Obama recently suggested,⁶ these countries may not be a core interest for the United States, but they are for Russia. Transatlantic partners need to decide not only how much money but also how much effort they are willing to spend to support these countries. Should commitments be made, transatlantic partners need to credibly and consistently support them and clearly communicate these commitments to EaP elites and publics.

This paper further explores these arguments by: 1) showing why and how the Russia-West conflict happened; 2) analyzing the drivers of decisions by EaP countries; 3) demonstrating some of the changes in relations between EaP countries and the West in light of Russia-West tensions; and 4) discussing a potential improved approach of the West to these countries. The first three sections draw heavily on the EU's actions in these countries. The United States supported the EU's policies and continued its own bilateral engagement rather than an EU-style encompassing regional strategy. The analysis also includes insight from conversations with officials from EaP countries, the EU, and the United States.

In an effort to prevent Minsk from siding more closely with Russia, the EU and the United States have relaxed their democracy and human rights conditionality.

⁵ Civil.Ge, "Georgian FM Visits NATO HQ," *Civil.Ge Daily News Online*, March 2, 2016, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29015>.

⁶ J. Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

2 THE RUSSIA-WEST CONFLICT: CLASH OF VISIONS

Despite Russia's share of mishaps in these countries, it seems that in some cases, especially where illiberalism has solid ground, Moscow has a better grasp of domestic political nuances and is ready to exploit them.

Russia has long realized that the congestion of international actors in the post-Soviet space, combined with often-attractive incentives and less intrusive policies from actors like the EU or the United States could further loosen its grip on what it calls its *blizhnee zarubezhye* or “near abroad.” Indeed, even if the EaP countries may not excel in democratization, they have often listed closer economic, political, and security cooperation with the EU and the United States among their priorities.

Thus, in a nutshell, the crisis of relations between Russia and the West has been about the clash of their visions for a specific group of states. While from Russia's perspective it is about maintaining its historical “sphere of influence,” from the European perspective it is about creating “a ring of friends” — democracies abiding by similar rules and norms and engaging in beneficial economic or political arrangements. Academic debates may argue that these notions are different. While spheres of influence denote a classic realist approach of interests, security, and power, the ring of friends refers to constructivist-advocated ideational proximity based on the rule of law. However, while the terms and more importantly means used may be different, the desired outcome of both is essentially the same: ensuring the long-lasting cooperation of a group of states and minimizing confrontation toward one's policies.

Nevertheless, there seems to be an essential difference between Western and Russian approaches to these countries in-between. Russia has pursued the politics of (military and economic) submission and absorption to make sure these countries will do its bidding where Moscow identifies its interests. The EU's projects, supported by the United States, have aimed to facilitate economic development through capacity building and technical assistance. In the long run, they are likely to facilitate greater foreign policy

sovereignty for these countries. Despite Russia's share of mishaps in these countries, it seems that in some cases, especially where illiberalism has solid ground, Moscow has a better grasp of domestic political nuances and is ready to exploit them. Even in the case of the Ukraine conflict, alongside with such doomed projects as *Novorossiya*, Russia managed to tap into the sentiments of “Russian speakers” who were ready to take up arms and try to secede from a pro-Western Kyiv. If anything, this points to Russia's tactical adaptability and willingness to go off-script, while European policy has continued applying the same frameworks from previous initiatives, regardless of changed domestic conditions.⁷

As this author has argued elsewhere⁸ and contrary to often heard arguments,⁹ Russia is not trying to externally promote an alternative to democracy. In addition, despite insistence on so-called traditional values as opposed to the *zagnivayusii Zapad* or “decaying” West, it acts on an ad-hoc basis in foreign countries, catering to groups that may feel disenchanting by their own domestic politics: e.g. France's Front National or other far-right or far-left groups. Moscow does, however, pursue two consistent goals.

First, internationally it is trying to set its place mainly vis-à-vis the United States by the attempts of

⁷ T. Börzel and T. Risse, “One Size Fits All! EU Policies for the Promotion of Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law,” Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, 2004, http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/27153/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/b5946bb5-e7b0-4bfc-9371-9c7a3c793abd/en/13_B%3C%3B6rzel_Risse-04.pdf; N. Shapovalova and R. Youngs, “EU Democracy Promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood,” *FRIDE*, December 18, 2012, <http://fride.org/publication/1088/eu-democracy-promotion-in-the-eastern-neighbourhood:-a-turn-to-civil-society>.

⁸ N. Babayan, “The Return of the Empire? Russia's Counteraction to Transatlantic Democracy Promotion in Its Near Abroad,” *Democratization* 22, no. 3, April 16, 2015, p. 438–58.

⁹ I. Melnykovska, H. Plamper, and R. Schweickert, “Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?” *Asia Europe Journal* 10, no. 1, May 1, 2012, p. 75–89.

creating alternative platforms for cooperation that go beyond the ones created by the West. Essentially, these attempts do not simply undermine or change the liberal international order but to show that Russia can successfully disrupt that order and that for that order to function, Russia has to be integrated on its own terms. This is not to say that Russia pursues realist-style interest-based policies exclusively. Yet its interests, conceived by the Kremlin elite, also stem from the idea that Russia is still a great power and should be treated as such. And, of course, every great power comes with its own “sphere of influence” or control.

Second, domestically, the Kremlin wants to ensure the survival of its own regime. Keeping the neighborhood countries within its control reinforces the status quo and the legitimacy of its current policies in the eyes of the Russian people, while countries leaving its sphere of influence feed into its narrative as Russia being “besieged by enemies.”¹⁰ It rather acutely understands that possible economic and political Westernization of these countries is likely to turn them from their involuntary allegiance to Russia. This has already happened in the case of the Baltic States in the early 1990s. In addition, democratization among the neighbors could spill over to Russia and force the current ruling elite out of power. Hence the vocal opposition to so-called “color revolutions,” which the Kremlin views as Western plots.

Russia’s opposition to Western projects intensified as the West increased its involvement in the region. Between 1991 and 2010, 36 regional organizations

were established in the post-Soviet space,¹¹ and these countries joined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe (CoE), and participated in a number of the EU’s regional projects. The EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), first outlined in 2003, has been an attempt to recreate the success of its 2004 enlargement,¹² despite the lack of the pivotal EU membership perspective and lack of political willingness to enforce conditionality. In addition, the ENP bunched together countries from the EU’s eastern and southern neighborhoods, much to the chagrin of such comparative front-runners as Georgia and Ukraine.¹³ Yet, it was mostly the EaP, launched in 2009, that met with strong Russian resistance. The EaP’s framework enhanced these ephemeral projects and included binding obligations, closer bilateral cooperation, and opportunities of unprecedented legal approximation with the EU. The EU also presented the EaP as an upgrade intensifying and deepening relations with these countries, which would move closer to the EU politically and economically and consequently away from Russia.

Keeping the neighborhood countries within its control reinforces [Russia’s] status quo and the legitimacy of its current policies in the eyes of the Russian people, while countries leaving its sphere of influence feed into its narrative as Russia being “besieged by enemies.”

¹⁰ N. Babayan, “Putin’s Enemies List,” *US News & World Report*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/articles/2016-01-11/whos-next-on-vladimir-putins-enemy-list>.

¹¹ N. Wirminghaus, “Ephemeral Regionalism: The Proliferation of (Failed) Regional Integration Initiatives in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” in *Roads to Regionalism: Genesis, Design, and Effects of Regional Organizations* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub Co, 2012), p. 25.

¹² J. Kelley, “New Wine in Old Wineskins: Promoting Political Reforms through the New European Neighbourhood Policy,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, no. 1 (2006): p. 29–55.

¹³ J. Boonstra and N. Shapovalova, “The EU’s Eastern Partnership: One Year Backwards,” *FRIDE*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.fride.org/publication/764/the-eu%27-s-eastern-partnership-one-year-backwards>.

Despite the reassurances from the EU that the EaP had not been designed as being against Russia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov interpreted the choice given to EaP partners as being either with Russia or with the EU.

Given its customary objections against NATO enlargement¹⁴ it should come as no surprise that Russia considered its reviving regional dominance to be challenged as the EU started negotiations on the Association Agreements (AA) and the DCFTA with EaP countries. Despite the reassurances from the EU that the EaP had not been designed as being against Russia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov interpreted the choice given to EaP partners as being either with Russia or with the EU. In private conversations, some representatives of EaP countries also mention that the EU's regional approach has been a miscalculation and raised red flags for Russia.¹⁵ It has created the impression of steadfast EU enlargement that could easily turn into another NATO expansion. Instead, bilateral agreements might have gone a longer way and while building necessary democratic institutions and free-trade agreements, might have avoided the impression of encroachment into Russia's so-called sphere of influence. The point here is, of course, not to undermine the right to sovereign decisions of these countries. Yet, it is to point out that confrontation might have been avoided by adapting to local conditions, taking into consideration Russia's threat perceptions (even if flawed), and moving beyond the comfort zone of group projects. However, breaking away from the EU's traditional approach of regional projects would require considerable effort and adaptability from an entity

that works on consensus and requires involvement of 28 governments.

Yet, in the case of the 2008 conflict with Georgia, Russia might have understood that military force was likely to slow down but not reverse pro-Western orientation. Thus, *inter alia* it reacted by urging EaP countries to join its Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. By initiating the Eurasian Customs Union, Russia has to some extent taken a page from the EU's playbook, even if the means of attracting partners were more aggressive than in the case of the EU. Yet, removing barriers to trade and the movement of labor went in line with customary EU steps: economic and administrative approximation leading to political convergence. The Russian initiative also mirrored Western and European regional integration by establishing a supranational institution — the Eurasian Economic Commission — and aligning its norms with those created by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Thus, these two regional integration projects, while largely based on similar if not overlapping norms and regulations, developed in parallel to each other, creating the atmosphere of competition. While the EU's DCFTA does not preclude participation in other free-trade agreements, membership in the Eurasian Customs Union results in loss of trade sovereignty and establishment of common tariffs incompatible with the ones under the DCFTA.

The parallel between the pillars of EU-led and Russia-led integration projects is not limited to economic and structural similarities but also includes possible cultural appeal. The EU has emphasized the notion of shared values of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law. Russia has invoked an "imagined community"¹⁶ of brotherly nations. However, there is also a notable difference: while the EU's

¹⁴ U. Klußmann, "Russia Wary of NATO Expansion: Ukraine and Georgia Want In," *Der Spiegel*, March 29, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/russia-wary-of-nato-expansion-ukraine-and-georgia-want-in-a-544176.html>; A. Anishchuk and M. Kiselyova, "Putin Says Annexation of Crimea Partly a Response to NATO Enlargement," *Reuters*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-nato-idUSBREA3G22A20140417>; N. Blome, K. Diekmann, and D. Biskup, "Putin: The Interview: For me it is not borders that matters," *Bild*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russianpresident-wladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html>.

¹⁵ Author's conversations with EaP representatives in Washington, DC and on the phone from November 2015 to February 2016.

¹⁶ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition* (London/New York: Verso, 1982).

“shared values” or lack thereof have often played a gatekeeping role toward non-compliant states, Russia’s imagined community aimed to include even slightly corresponding ones.

Nevertheless, instead of relying on the far-fetched normative appeal of its initiatives, Russia also took more substantial measures to “minimize the impact of ... new ties with the EU.”¹⁷ Russia applied pressure, including through misuse of energy pricing, artificial trade obstacles such as import bans and cumbersome customs procedures, military cooperation and security guarantees, and through the instrumentalization of protracted conflicts. While both the EU and Russia have essentially been advancing projects of regional integration, Russia has also been facilitating regional disintegration, especially in the case of the South Caucasus, through its instrumentalization of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and its patronage of the Georgian breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. More drastically, it annexed Crimea and supported secessionist groups leading to an armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Recent reports show that it continues military build-up in the Black Sea region to further exert pressure on its neighbors.¹⁸

In short, Russia continues attempts to shape the narrative on the EU’s Eastern neighborhood. This narrative presents these countries as a uniform region with shared history, values, and interests. It also continues to describe these countries as Russia’s “sphere of influence.” This presents a two-fold challenge. First, while this is rather far from reality, this lasting perception runs the risk of further influencing the West. The United States

¹⁷ RFE/RL, “Transnistria Deepens Ties With Russia,” July 3, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/transnistria-deepens-ties-with-russia/25444549.html>.

¹⁸ J. Bugajski and P. B. Doran, “Black Sea Rising: Russia’s Strategy in Southeast Europe,” Center for European Policy Analysis, February 9, 2016, <http://cepa.org/index/?id=30110516dcaa52169cb99e9f54bd7e84>.

has not given these countries high priority and the EU tends to group countries into uniform policies regardless of domestic conditions. High-ranking EU officials recognize that EaP countries are suspicious of each other,¹⁹ and this often hinders regional cooperation projects. The EU has recently started to adopt a more differentiated approach to these countries, which needs to be enhanced. Second, in some cases this narrative is also picked up by EaP political elites and conveyed to the public in order to justify unpopular domestic decisions. A case in point is the narrative on historical proximity to Russia adopted by the Armenian government after its decision to join the Customs Union.

The Eastern Partnership Countries’ Choices and Challenges

Undoubtedly, Russia has strong influence in the EaP countries. Yet this influence largely feeds off domestic political, economic, and security challenges and the authoritarian tendencies of local elites. Such elites may prefer to cooperate with Russia to remain in power. The Kremlin does not demand democratization of political practices and as a result, at least in the short term, does not threaten the status quo. Yet, Russia’s pressure finds less fertile ground whenever the levels of democracy are higher and corruption are lower (Georgia), the civil society is better positioned at conveying publics’ interests to the governments (to some extent Ukraine), or, more mundanely, a country has a bargaining chip over Russia (Azerbaijan).

Since its Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia’s political leaders have vocally supported economic and political closeness to the EU. They have also consistently pursued NATO membership, considering it a guarantor of the country’s

¹⁹ Author’s conversation with European Council official in October 2015.

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Armenia's dependence on Russia also extends to security considerations, as both the elites and the public continue to regard Russia as the guarantor of the country's security in light of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan.

survival.²⁰ The European choice for Armenia seemed to go unquestioned in the 2000s. Armenia was also one of the highest per capita recipients of development aid from the United States, including \$230 million from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Yet, in November 2013, after three years of negotiations with the EU and only two months before an EaP summit, Yerevan suddenly rejected initialing its AA and signing its DCFTA, instead joining the Eurasian Customs Union, in 2015. Ukraine's initial withdrawal from initialing the AA in the same month as Armenia's withdrawal resulted in the "Euromaidan" protests and the popular ousting of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and a separatist conflict in the eastern parts of the country, supported by the Kremlin. Moldova, a former poster-child of the EaP, signed the AA in June 2014; however, an openly Euroskeptic party also won the highest number of seats in 2014 parliamentary elections with the slogan "Together with Russia!" Popular protests in 2016 have further complicated Moldova's political situation and its geopolitical and economic orientation. Azerbaijan and Belarus, while nominally participating in the EaP, have not showed much interest in closer political integration with the EU, given the threat it could pose to their authoritarian regimes. At the same time, Azerbaijan has preferred and (largely due to its energy independence) managed to stay away from Russia's EEU.

Several factors can influence decisions on the choice of a regional integration project: interdependence in a specific policy area, ideational proximity, or preferences of specific

domestic groups.²¹ Economic interdependence is an important factor in EaP countries' relations with Russia. Yet this interdependence is often highly asymmetrical. For example, Russia is a large export market for Armenia and Belarus, and their economic dependence on Russia (through labor migration and remittances, among other factors) has to some extent contributed to their preference of the Eurasian Union over the EaP. However, the choice has proven to be misguided, and Armenia's already weak economy weakened further after the 2015 depreciation of the Russian currency. Armenia's dependence on Russia also extends to security considerations, as both the elites and the public continue to regard Russia as the guarantor of the country's security in light of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. Given Moldova's geographic proximity to the EU, the projected benefits of the DCFTA were greater than for the others: GDP was projected to rise 5 percent and exports to the EU 16 percent. Azerbaijan has always been reluctant to actively participate in either project given its energy resources. Until recent economic troubles, those resources successfully filled the national budget and, given EU plans to diversify its energy resources, to some extent safeguarded Azerbaijan from Western criticism over its poor democracy and human rights record. At the same time, the economic factor, and even Russia's import embargoes, did not stop Georgia from vocally preferring Euroatlantic integration. As a Georgian diplomat put it: such critical junctures as forced Sovietization in the 1920s and the independence movement in the

²⁰ S. Schocher, "NATO oder EU können nicht weiter so agieren" [NATO and the EU can't operate like this any longer], *Kurier*, July 25, 2015, <http://kurier.at/politik/ausland/goergiens-verteidigungsministerin-warnt-vor-reaktionsmodus-gegenueber-russland/143.233.825>.

²¹ E. B. Haas, *Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950-1957* (Chicago: Stanford University Press, 1958); A. Wiener and T. Diez, *European Integration Theory, Second Edition* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); A. Moravcsik, "Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): pp. 473-524.

early 1990s set Georgia on a course that is closer to Europe and further from Russia.²²

This brings us to ideational proximity such as adherence to similar cultural and societal values that may influence the choice of regional integration. The Kremlin has attempted to reinvigorate the sense of shared identity by appealing to traditional values and shared history. Yet such ideas as the Russian-speaking “*russkiy mir*” (Russian world) do not project the desired appeal, especially in the countries of the South Caucasus, which throughout their Soviet past maintained their unique cultural and linguistic identities. Since the 2000s, Georgians have preferred English as a foreign language, and only 7 percent of Azerbaijanis say they have an advanced knowledge of Russian.²³ Russia’s chief propagandist, Dmitry Kiselev, has notoriously complained that Armenians stopped speaking Russian. Even such a known Russophile as Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenko, who for two decades shunned the Belarusian language, has taken recent steps for its political revival. Moreover, more than 50 percent of Armenians and Georgians and more than 90 percent of Azerbaijanis disapprove of marriages with Russians (the numbers are similar regarding marriages with Europeans or Americans).²⁴ Conservative publics in these countries continue to resist some of fundamental rights associated with the West. For example, approximately 90 percent of respondents in the South Caucasus, and 80 percent in Ukraine and Moldova²⁵ find same-sex

Table 1. Affinity of EaP Countries and Russia to European Culture (percent)

Personally, to what extent do you feel close to European culture?		
	Close	Far
Armenia	32	67
Azerbaijan	27	69
Belarus	36	57
Georgia	26	71
Moldova	34	59
Ukraine	46	45
Russia	48	47

Source: Author’s compilation based on EU Neighbourhood Library data and surveys conducted in 2014. <http://www.enpi-info.eu/library/node>.

relations unacceptable. These inherent perceptions make them readily in tune with widely available Russian television channels promoting the “decay” of the West. Surprisingly, even the countries that have been performing best in European integration projects do not show close affinity to European culture (Table 1), while Russia is narrowly ahead of Ukraine in its self-perceived “Europeanness.” In the case of Moldova, close ties with EU-member Romania (a type of kinship is absent in the cases of other EaP countries), may have partially accounted for Moldova’s pro-European orientation. At the same time, Poland’s close economic relations and intensive promotion of civil society in Ukraine²⁶ are likely to have enhanced Ukraine’s Western orientation.

Nevertheless, these explanations rest on the premises of established democracy, broad societal control over governmental decisions, and elites’ consideration of the long-term development of the country. Yet, it is the short-term considerations

²² Author’s conversation in February 2016 in Washington, DC.

²³ Caucasus Research Resource Centers, “Caucasus Barometer Survey,” 2013, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/KNOWRUS/>.

²⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Centers, “Caucasus Barometer Survey,” 2013, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/MARWRUS/>.

²⁵ Caucasus Research Resource Centers, “Attitudes toward Homosexuality in the South Caucasus,” *Social Science in the Caucasus*, July 24, 2013, http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2013_07_01_archive.html.

²⁶ P. Pospieszna, *Democracy Assistance from the Third Wave: Polish Engagement in Belarus and Ukraine* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

While all six EaP countries' elites pledge their adherence to democracy, data by Freedom House, Polity IV, and other indices show that democratization has stagnated or been on steady retreat since the early 2000s in at least three of them — Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus.

of political and economic elites that have often accounted for the choice of an integration project. Lack of domestic willingness for adopting and implementing political and in some cases economic reforms may be the most important and hardest-to-tackle driver behind limited impact of Western policies. The lack of domestic willingness stems from high costs for domestic political and economic elites in the case of adaptation to Western-supported reforms. Any political or economic change requires adaptation, which may incur certain costs for the involved actors.²⁷ In the process of bargaining over one project or the other, they realize that the EaP comes with the attached strings of democratization and economic competition, which may eventually result in loss of power by political elites and loss of profit by economic elites. The costs become especially high if the two categories overlap, as is the case in most of these countries. For the elites that are authoritarian and are corrupt, Russia offers a safe haven of preserving their practices.

While all six EaP countries' elites pledge their adherence to democracy, data by Freedom House, Polity IV, and other indices show that democratization has stagnated or been on steady retreat since the early 2000s in at least three of them — Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and Heritage Foundation's Economic Freedom Index, corruption remains very high in five of these countries, with Georgia as a comparative front-runner. Even Ukraine's Maidan protests were to an extent against corruption in the government and preference of short-term gains of political elites over the long-term development of the country. Similar protests, though smaller in scale, also happened in Armenia in 2013, but did

²⁷ F. Schimmelfennig, S. Engert, and H. Knobel, *International Socialization in Europe: European Organizations, Political Conditionality and Democratic Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

not receive matching international attention. The 2016 Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) categorizes political participation — the chance that the populace decides who governs — as excellent in Georgia, sound in Ukraine and Moldova, fair in Armenia (at the bottom of the category), and flawed in Azerbaijan and Belarus. BTI also similarly distributes these countries in the category of stability of democratic institutions: Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova as sound; Armenia as flawed; and Azerbaijan and Belarus as poor.

Perhaps aware of high levels of public distrust, governments in some EaP countries, especially Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, are wary of color revolutions or indeed any anti-regime protests. Besides lack of democratic progress, there is a clear trend of economic failure that has the potential to trigger popular protests.²⁸ In Armenia, where roughly one-third of the population lives at or below the poverty line, people protested in 2013 against the decision to snub the association with the EU in favor of Russia's Customs Union, in 2014 against a questionable pension reform, and in 2015 against another electricity price hike designed to cover up corruption and mismanagement in the utility company.²⁹ Since December 2015, the Azerbaijani currency, the manat, has lost about one-third of its value against the U.S. dollar. Even in that tightly controlled country, economic problems

²⁸ H. Hagemann and V. Kufenko, "Economic, Structural and Socio-Psychological Determinants of Protests in Russia during 2011–2012," *Economics of Transition* 24, no. 1 (2016): p. 3–30.

²⁹ N. Aleksanyan, "Thousands in Yerevan March on Presidential Palace to 'Reclaim' Armenia's Independence," *Hetq*, September 21, 2013, <http://hetq.am/eng/news/29522/thousands-in-yerevan-march-on-presidential-palace-to-reclaim-armenias-independence.html>; A. Mkrтчian, "More Workers Join Protests Against Armenian Pension Reform," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 10, 2014, <http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/25259456.html>; N. Babayan, "Game of Narratives: Russian Media and Armenia's #ElectricYerevan," *Transatlantic Academy*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/node/826>.

led to a rare popular protest in January 2016.³⁰ Furthermore, the Azerbaijani government moved to reduce the chances of civil society development by putting pressure on local and foreign NGOs, including raids on Radio Free Europe's offices and freezing the accounts of NGOs that received funding from The German Marshall Fund of the United States, the International Research and Exchanges Board, and the Open Society Foundation.³¹

When it comes to the economic elites, or in some cases oligarchs, what seems to be at stake besides possible profit are their competitiveness and the possibility to continue their practices. As an Armenian official put it, the EaP offered great long-term benefits for the country.³² Yet, little local resistance to pressure from Moscow also came from the understanding that current economic elites in Armenia could not compete on EU market (besides the market for raw materials) due to the sub-standard level of their products. In contrast, the Russian market is less demanding in terms of quality control (except for instances when the Kremlin uses economic embargo as a political tool). This is hardly surprising given the number of monopolies in the country, where single individuals reportedly control import and export of specific goods, and "the whole economy suffers" due to corruption.³³ For example, Samvel Sukiasyan, a member of the ruling Republican

Party of Armenia, reportedly controls the sugar and wheat trade and Mihran Poghosyan, a high-rank official of Armenia's Ministry of Justice, reportedly controls banana imports.³⁴ Azerbaijan's economy is controlled by the families of the president and his wife.³⁵ The role of individual oligarchs in governmental decisions is lesser in Belarus, where they may aid Lukashenko but hardly influence his decisions.³⁶ Perhaps this lack of real oligarchs in Belarus is what makes Lukashenko the most popular foreign leader among Ukrainians, rated positively by 63 percent; he is ahead of Angela Merkel by 5 points, Barack Obama by 14 points, and François Hollande by 23 points.³⁷

Oligarchs wielding substantial political power can also influence the course of countries that have already chosen association with the EU. The case in point is the collapse of the Moldovan ruling coalition in 2013 largely due to disagreements between oligarchs Vladimir Plahotniuc and Vladimir Filat: the latter was also Moldova's prime minister from 2009 to 2013. While, the EU has helped in subduing the conflict, the new coalition simply gave more power to Plahotniuc which erupted in a scandal when \$1 billion disappeared from Moldovan banks. Protestors flooded Chisinau's streets. The government appointed by the parliament amid protests in January 2016

Little local resistance to pressure from Moscow came from the understanding that current economic elites in Armenia could not compete on EU market (besides the market for raw materials) due to the sub-standard level of their products.

³⁰ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, "Scores Detained In Azerbaijan Amid Countrywide Protests," January 14, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-protests-arrests-rising-prices/27487867.html>.

³¹ R. Mikayilovlu, "More Seven NGO Bank Accounts Frozen," *APA*, August 5, 2014, <http://en.apa.az/news/214809>; *Azadliq Radiosu*, "IREX in Azerbaijan and the crisis of democracy promotion," December 17, 2014, <http://www.azadliq.org/content/article/26748738.html>.

³² Author's conversation in February 2016.

³³ R. Mills, "Remarks at AmCham Meeting," U.S. Department of State, November 10, 2015, <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/armenia/231771/PDFs/news111015-amb.pdf>.

³⁴ S. Khojuyan, "Banana Monopoly?: Armenian Anti-Trust Body Sees No Abuse of Market Position by Importer," *Armenia Now*, February 12, 2016, https://www.armenianow.com/economy/69857/armenia_economy_monopolies_bananas_chocolate.

³⁵ *The Guardian*, "U.S. Embassy Cables: Who Owns What in Azerbaijan," December 12, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/245758>.

³⁶ S. Bohdan, "Are There Any Oligarchs in Belarus?" *Belarus Digest*, May 1, 2012, <http://belarusdigest.com/story/are-there-any-oligarchs-belarus-9069>.

³⁷ РЕЙТИНГ [Rating], "ОТНОШЕНИЕ УКРАИНЦЕВ К МИРОВЫМ ЛИДЕРАМ. ЯНВАРЬ 2016 [Ukrainians' Attitudes toward World Leaders. January 2016]" February 10, 2016, http://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/otnoshenie_ukraincev_k_mirovym_lideram_yanvar_2016.html.

marked the end of “pro-European” orientation, while the pro-Russian parties of Igor Dodon and Renato Usatii are gaining ground and Plahotniuc is increasing his influence on the government. Oligarchic rule also continues to threaten Ukraine’s future, as technocratic politicians struggle to push reforms forward; 87 percent of Ukrainian respondents say corruption is a serious problem for Ukraine,³⁸ and as of January 2016, more than 70 percent did not trust President Petro Poroshenko.³⁹

³⁸ *International Republican Institute*, “First-Ever IRI Ukraine National Municipal Poll: Ukrainians Deeply Concerned Over Corruption; Remain Committed to Europe and Democracy,” May 19, 2015, <http://www.iri.org/resource/first-ever-iri-ukraine-national-municipal-poll-ukrainians-deeply-concerned-over-corruption>.

³⁹ Continuously updated data can be found at <http://ratinggroup.ua/ru/>.

3

THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES AND THE WEST BEYOND THE RUSSIA-WEST CONFLICT

If anyone has benefited from Russia-West conflict, it is the incumbent regimes of the countries that have previously ignored or snubbed Euroatlantic integration. The threat of exclusion has been among the rare pressures that can compel a state or a stakeholder to accept an outcome it does not prefer in the short-term as the latter may alter the preferred status quo.⁴⁰ For a considerable time, the EU reinforced this threat with the states that were candidates for EU membership. For its part, the United States cut funding through the MCC for in compliance with democratic reforms (Armenia), increased it when democracy progressed (Georgia), or did not provide it at all where minimum democratic standards were not met (Azerbaijan). Yet, the same sort of strict conditionality has not been applied by the EU with countries of the ENP or the EaP. The EU has regularly published reports on the progress of EaP countries, sometimes offering mild criticism and sometimes condoning in compliance with agreed norms. With the recent steps to further negotiate with Armenia on an alternative agreement, this threat of exclusion seems to become irrelevant. In the 2000s, Lukashenko was nicknamed “the last dictator in Europe.” Nowadays, next to Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko’s notoriety seems to fade away.

Belarus and a number of its officials, including Lukashenko, had been under Western sanctions since 2004. A period of dialogue between the EU and Belarus ended with the mass arrest of dissidents after the presidential election in December 2010. Yet, Lukashenko managed to make Belarus relevant again for Europe by hosting negotiations over the Ukraine crisis in Minsk and marginally easing the prosecution of the opposition. The strategy seems to have paid off.

⁴⁰ A. Moravcsik, “Negotiating the Single European Act: National Interests and Conventional Statecraft in the European Community,” *International Organization* 45, no. 01 (December 1991): p. 19–56.

On February 15, 2016, EU foreign ministers agreed to remove the sanctions on Lukashenko as well as other Belarusian officials and companies. This decision marked a clear softening of the EU’s position, which previously had imposed sanctions over violations of democracy and human rights. The Belarusian government freed some political prisoners, but as experts and even EU officials say, it has done virtually nothing to comply with the rest of the requirements. Shortly before the EU’s decision, the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus said the “dismal human rights situation” had not changed.⁴¹ The annual “Freedom in the World” report by Freedom House published on February 19 also noted a lack of change.⁴²

The timing of the lifting of sanctions is directly related to strained relations with Russia. In private conversations, EU officials and experts also note that EU-Belarus relations depend largely upon EU-Russia relations, as Belarus now feels like a “battleground of powers,” and the EU is increasingly reaching out. Lukashenko’s current approach may seem friendlier to the West, but it does not mean he is fully on the EU’s side: the day after the EU’s vote, Belarus adopted a new military doctrine with Russia, which some Belarusian officials view as a response to NATO expansion. The decision by the Russian-led Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development to provide Belarus with a \$2 billion loan⁴³ further attests to

⁴¹ M. Haraszti, “No Changes in Dismal Human Rights Situation since Presidential Election,” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, February 9, 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17027&LangID=E>.

⁴² Freedom House, “Freedom in the World Report 2016,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>.

⁴³ Belteleradiocompany, “Belarus to Receive 500 Million Dollars from Eurasian Fund of Stabilisation and Development within Days,” March 28, 2016, http://www.tvr.by/eng/news/ekonomika/500_millionov_dollarov_v_blizhayshie_dni_poluchit_belarus_ot_evraziyskogo_fonda_stabilizatsii_i_razv/.

If anyone has benefited from Russia-West conflict, it is the incumbent regimes of the countries that have previously ignored or snubbed Euroatlantic integration.

While Russia's strained relations with the West seem to have benefited Armenian and Belarusian elites, they seem to have equally marred Georgia's prospects of Euroatlantic integration.

Lukashenko's ability to maneuver between the West and Russia.

On December 6, 2015, Armenia underwent a constitutional reform to move to a parliamentary system, which some consider more conducive to democratization.⁴⁴ The opposition in Armenia insisted that constitutional changes sought to ensure the incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan's power after his second term comes to an end and he is banned from running by the constitution. While swapping positions as Putin did in 2009 would be tricky given Sargsyan's lower level of control over his coalition, the move toward a parliamentary system serves another important objective: it provides a cloak of democratic progress, needed in ongoing negotiations with the EU or in dodging the criticism from the United States. Two years ago, the EU rejected a watered-down deal that would not include the free trade agreement, but in December 2015, it seemed to offer just that with negotiations over a new framework agreement.

While Russia's strained relations with the West seem to have benefited Armenian and Belarusian elites, they seem to have equally marred Georgia's prospects of Euroatlantic integration. Despite Georgia's steady and serious efforts to join NATO,

⁴⁴ J. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990): p. 51–69.

both Alliance and Georgia officials agree that NATO will not offer a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia at its summit in Warsaw in summer 2016. While NATO makes membership decisions through consensus by its members, Russia has its role too. At a February 2016 press conference, U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Ian Kelly remarked that the decision on delaying Georgia's acceptance to NATO is also conditioned by Georgia's proximity to Russia and NATO's unwillingness to potentially risk Georgia's security by offering MAP.⁴⁵ At the same time, continuing Russia-West conflict, though combined with domestic incapacity to reform, deepens "Ukraine fatigue"⁴⁶ among Western political circles.

⁴⁵ *Kommersant*, "США «не хотят подвергать Грузию риску»" [United States Does Not Want to Risk Georgia], February 25, 2016, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2923801>.

⁴⁶ S. K. Pifer, "Curing 'Ukraine Fatigue,'" *The New York Times*, February 9, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/10/opinion/10iht-edpifer.html>; D. Patrikarakos, "The West's 'Ukraine Fatigue,'" *Politico*, September 29, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/the-wests-dangerous-ukraine-fatigue/>.

4 WHAT THE TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERS CAN DO WITH EAP COUNTRIES

The West's approach to the conflict in Ukraine points to two observations: First, there seems to be determination and unity (even if shaky at times) to get involved when international law is violated (especially when it is close to the EU's borders). Second, continued confrontation without clear solutions seems to create issue fatigue, as U.S. and European leaders move to another possibly more pressing matter. Blaming Russia for the sluggish political and economic development of EaP countries is easy. Moscow of course provides fertile grounds for criticism, and it will continue to be a spoiler in the region as long as it maintains its current threat perception. However, justifying the lack of clarity and decisiveness in transatlantic strategies by the actions of others is not helpful. If the transatlantic partners want to achieve specific reforms in EaP countries, they need to provide commitment backed up by credibility, consistency, and (smart) conditionality, as well as continuous and clear communication.

Successful implementation of these components hinges on several caveats. First, the interests of the transatlantic partners in the region do not seem stable. Will transatlantic partners continue to prioritize their relations with EaP countries to the extent of being ready to halt Russia's advances? Moral considerations aside, one of the main interests for transatlantic partners, especially from the EU's perspective, is having a secure neighborhood with a steady energy supply: instability and conflicts may spill over borders, generate flows of new refugees, and disrupt energy deliverance. In the case of the United States, the main interest may be in Europe's stability as a major trading and security partner. Given falling oil prices, increasing use of alternative sources of energy, and reduced needs to support NATO forces in Afghanistan, the strategic role of the South Caucasus, for example, may diminish. Yet, enhanced European security is possible if there are

no active conflicts surrounding Europe, including in countries that are not EU members. Five out of six EaP countries are currently involved in some sort of armed (frozen) conflict. While Russia is involved in many of these conflicts too, the West's approach should be increasing the economic and security capacity of these countries, should the latter be willing to accept that help. This is not to advocate immediate NATO membership; given current situation, that may further antagonize Russia, and cause havoc in the region. Yet, the West should pursue further economic investment (provided it is beneficial for Western investors) and closer security cooperation by providing technical assistance and expertise, especially in border control when necessary. At the same time, the West should more actively engage in negotiations over resolution of so-called frozen conflicts, since those tend to heat up, as the outbreak of fighting in Nagorno Karabakh in April 2016 showed.⁴⁷ Local leaders also acknowledge that resolution of security issues can facilitate further political and economic development of the region.⁴⁸ Such cooperation may also further enhance the EU's perception in EaP countries as bringing "peace and stability" and being an important partner (Table 2).

Second, massive refugee flows from Syria continue to divert attention from the EaP countries and cause financial constraints further shaping Western priorities.

Third, the region, especially the South Caucasus, is receiving increased attention from other international actors, which at least by the nature

⁴⁷N. Babayan, "Here's what the research reveals about the violence in Nagorno Karabakh — and how 'freezing' conflicts can backfire," *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/07/here-what-the-research-reveals-about-the-violence-in-nagorno-karabakh/>.

⁴⁸ As Girogi Margvelashvili, the president of Georgia, noted in an address at George Washington University in Washington, DC, on March 31, 2016.

If the transatlantic partners want to achieve specific reforms in EaP countries, they need to provide commitment backed up by credibility, consistency, and (smart) conditionality, as well as continuous and clear communication.

Table 2. Perceptions of the EU as Security Facilitator and Partner (percent)

	The European Union brings peace and stability in the region surrounding (our country)	The European Union is an important partner of our country
Armenia	62	75
Azerbaijan	38	42
Belarus	30	42
Georgia	58	68
Moldova	48	60
Ukraine	58	67

Source: Author's compilation based on EU Neighbourhood Library data and surveys conducted in 2014. <http://www.enpi-info.eu/library/node>.

of their regimes may be closer to Russia than the West. With sanctions on Iran lifted, it has renewed its involvement especially in the South Caucasus. While Armenia's relations have been continuously friendly with Iran, there is a noticeable and nascent intensification of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan,⁴⁹ and Georgia considers itself a "natural partner"⁵⁰ for Iran's integration into regional and world energy markets. At the same time, while China does not seem to pursue geopolitical goals in this region, it is emerging as an important trade

⁴⁹ Z. Shiriyev, "The Economic and Geopolitical Implications of Iran and Azerbaijan's Recent Engagement," *Jamestown Foundation*, March 9, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45189&no_cache=1.

⁵⁰ G. Margvelashvili.

and investment partner for EaP countries.⁵¹ For instance, Georgia has started negotiations with China over a free trade agreement.

Commitment Backed By Consistency, Credibility, and (Smart) Conditionality

Commitment from the transatlantic partners to post-Soviet countries can stem from common economic and security concerns and clear understanding of whether these countries are important for Western foreign policy objectives on their own or only as part of relations with Russia. The caveat for a genuine transatlantic strategy, however, is that the objectives and sensitivities of the United States and Europe do not also always converge in relation to Russia. Given the proximity to the EU, troubles in the region resonate more acutely in Europe than in the United States.

Western support to EaP countries should continue and be enhanced only in return for tangible political and economic reforms. At the same time, conditionality should be differentiated and adapted to local conditions. Thus, the West needs to follow the basic principle behind the EaP, which is "more for more," while coordinating those efforts both with local governments and local civil societies. This is important since, given the high levels of corruption and low levels of democracy in some of these countries, lack of conditionality may encourage "grant culture" among political elites: an expectation that there will still be funding even without reforms.

⁵¹ P. Taylor, "China's New Foreign Policy Takes Shape -- in Moldova," *Reuters*, February 2, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-moldova-idUSTRE61140D20100202>; M. Cecire, "China's Growing Presence in Georgia," *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/chinas-growing-presence-in-georgia/>; S. Ramani, "Hey, Putin, Have You Seen How Much China Is Investing in Ukraine?," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/24/hey-putin-have-you-seen-how-much-china-is-investing-in-ukraine/>.

Consistency and credibility are also essential. The problem here is not the West's realist preference for stability over democracy, or its occasional cooperation with repressive regimes, when required by national interests. The problem is that changing gears on the very values that the West regularly pledges to protect sends a bad signal to offenders that they may carry on as usual. It also aggravates the existing claims of double standards: Belarus has often been the target of Western criticism, but as numerous reports show, Azerbaijan's record on democracy and human rights is even worse.⁵² However, Baku's energy resources give it strategic importance and leverage, resulting in milder criticism. Finally, a lack of consistency diminishes the West's credibility regarding its incentives or threats, while providing Putin with grounds to complain about the sanctions on Russia. Credibility also applies to providing realistic incentives. There are ongoing calls that an offer of EU or NATO membership perspective will send a strong signal to these countries, especially Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and encourage their political development. Yet membership prospects for these countries are currently unrealistic, given the lack of political will for enlargement in the West and as long as the EU and NATO remain committed to their own membership criteria, and would simply create false expectations. False expectations tend to create disenchantment and feed Russia's narrative of the "unreliable West." Yet, consistent involvement in promoted policies is important to prevent backsliding. The example of the original color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine are cases in point: shortly afterwards, Western supporters of democracy considered their missions accomplished and significantly decreased their support for reforms.

⁵² Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2015: Azerbaijan," 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/azerbaijan>; Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan 2015/2016," 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan/report-azerbaijan/>.

Continuous and Clear Communication

Caucasus Barometer surveys from 2013 show that only about 20 percent of respondents received any information on EU activities from television, which continues to be the major information source in post-Soviet countries. Transatlantic partners need clear channels of communication that would increase awareness not only among local officials but also civil societies and publics. This is an especially crucial point for the EU, which preferred to keep a lower profile in EaP countries up until the Ukraine crisis. This view was confirmed to this author in 2011 by the staff of EU delegations in the region. Later in 2015, the staff of the European External Action Service again reiterated the EU's need for better communication with Eastern Neighborhood countries and a more structured approach. While the EU is often the largest donor for these countries, its contributions go unnoticed by general public.⁵³ This is a domain that the EU can learn about from its U.S. partners: as this author also recalls from her years with a USAID project, every accomplishment was communicated to the larger audience and every tangible contribution bore a USAID sticker "from the American people."

Clear communication of the West's policies and principles, and the benefits of those for local communities, is important, especially in an environment where local media may be constrained in its freedom, Kremlin-controlled channels have wide reach, and yet there is noticeable support for the EU. Besides the EU's own communication issues, the problem is also aggravated by Russia's own disinformation efforts. However, such efforts as the EU's EastStratcom task force⁵⁴ and the U.S. counter-disinformation bill introduced by U.S.

⁵³ Author's conversation with an official of the European Council in October 2015 in Brussels.

⁵⁴ N. Babayan, "Russia's Propaganda and the EU's Mythbusters," Transatlantic Academy, November 16, 2015, <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/node/864>.

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Senators Rob Portman and Chris Murphy in March 2016 can help tackle disinformation problems. They may be further enhanced through continued educational exchanges such as those sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and the EU's Erasmus program, as respondents with higher education tend to support democracy and cooperation with the West. At the same time, also younger generations also tend to support integration with the EU, while those preferring the EEU explain their choice mostly through security and geopolitical considerations as opposed to respect for the human rights and economic development envisaged by the EU.⁵⁵

These trends allow for two additional conclusions: First, they show that even the countries that have currently chosen an EEU-path are still willing to cooperate with the EU. Additionally, the reasons for their support are more long-term, rather than fluctuating and volatile as in the case of the EEU. Second, they decisively show that the foreign policy orientations of these countries may change if their domestic conditions and vulnerabilities, such as energy dependence or protracted conflicts, receive resolution. While the latter are largely in the hands of the local elites and societies, the West can still help them by providing negotiation platforms and strengthening democratic institutions.

⁵⁵ D. Ter-Stepanyan and E. Khachatryan, "Between Freedom and Security" (Vanadzor: Peace Prologue NGO, 2015), http://dealingwiththepast.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/between_freedom_and_security_eng.pdf.

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